

Educational Attainment, 1999

Americans are more educated than ever before.

Greater educational attainment spells greater socioeconomic success for individuals and the country. For every progressively higher level of education, earnings are higher. This relationship holds true, not only for the population as a whole, but also for population subgroups, including men and women and various racial and ethnic groups.

Although the overall trend has been toward a more educated society, significant differences exist among various population segments. Nevertheless, the educational attainment of young adults, those aged 25 to 29, provides a glimpse of our country's future and indicates dramatic improvements by groups who historically have been less well educated.

The percentage of the adults who are high school graduates continued to rise in 1999.

The Current Population Survey (CPS) has tracked improvements in educational levels since 1947. Over four-fifths of all adults aged 25 and older had completed at least high school, according to the March 1999 CPS. One in four adults held a bachelor's degree or higher.

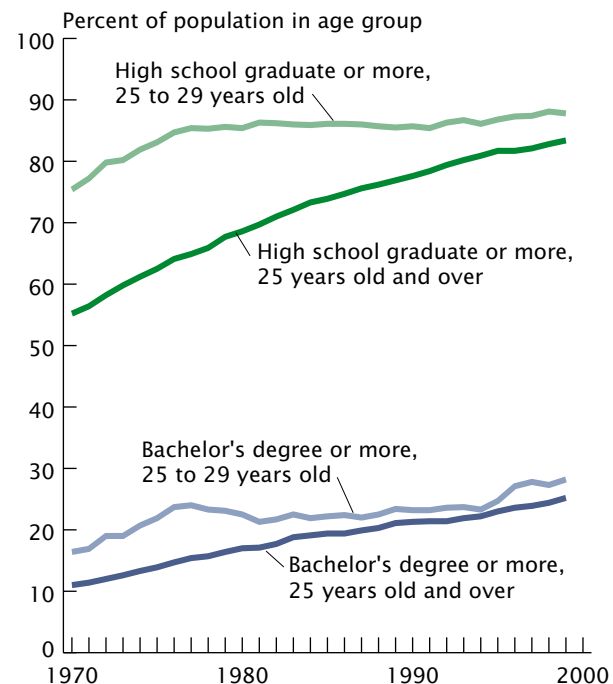
However, the educational attainment of young adults may be leveling off. The percentage of people aged 25 to 29 in 1999 who had completed high school was

88 percent, no different than it was in 1997 and 1998. The percentage of young adults who had completed a bachelor's degree was 28 percent; statistically equivalent to the record high reached in 1998.

Men and women aged 25 and older were equally likely to have completed high school — 83 percent in 1999.¹ However, men were more likely than women to have completed college, 28 percent compared with 23 percent. The situation was quite different among adults aged 25 to 29. In 1999, 90 percent of young women were high school graduates and 30 percent had completed a bachelor's degree. Among young men, 86 percent were high school graduates and 27 percent held a bachelor's degree or higher.

¹ The difference between the proportion of men and women aged 25 and older who had completed high school was not statistically significant.

Figure 9-1.
High School and College Graduates:
1970-99



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, March 1970 to March 1999.

Words That Count

- **Educational attainment** is measured for the population aged 25 and older. It is derived from a single question asked in the Current Population Survey: "What is the highest grade of school . . . completed, or the highest degree . . . received?" Before 1992, educational attainment was measured in the CPS only by years of schooling completed.

Educational attainment differs by race and ethnicity.²

Among non-Hispanics, 88 percent of Whites and 77 percent of Blacks were high school graduates. However, the difference between White non-Hispanics and Black non-Hispanics narrowed over the decade as the proportion of Black non-Hispanic high school graduates increased. Among the population aged 25 and older, the spread decreased from 16 percentage points in 1989 to 10 percentage points in 1999.

In 1999, high school graduates accounted for 85 percent of the Asian and Pacific Islander non-Hispanic population aged 25 and older. This group had the greatest proportion of college graduates. Their 42 percent graduation rate compares with 28 percent for White non-Hispanics and 16 percent for Black non-Hispanics.

In 1999, 56 percent of the Hispanic population³ aged 25 and older had a high school diploma or higher and 11 percent held a bachelor's degree or higher. The share holding a high school diploma was 5 percentage points greater than it was 1989. The share holding

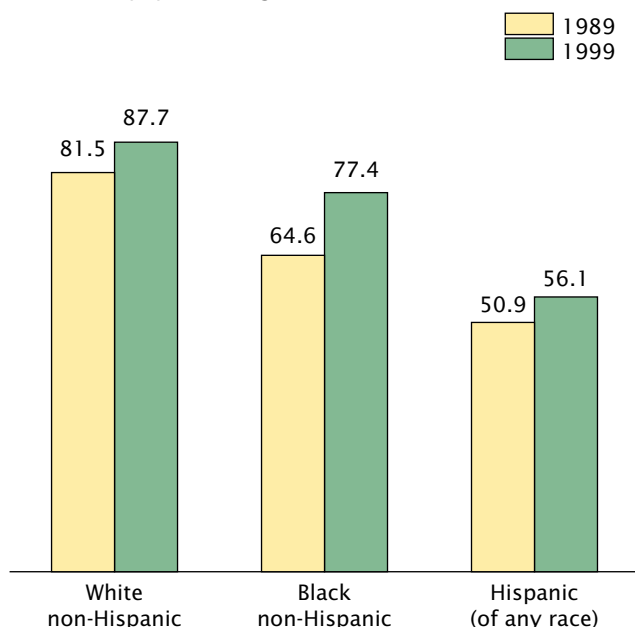
² The racial categories used in this chapter (White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, and Asian and Pacific Islander non-Hispanic) exclude Hispanics.

³ Hispanics may be of any race.

Figure 9-2.

People Aged 25 and Older Who Have Completed High School or More for Selected Racial and Ethnic Groups: 1989 and 1999

(Percent of population aged 25 and older)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, March 1989 and 1999.

a bachelor's degree was not significantly different from the share 10 years earlier.

Attainment levels varied by region and state.

In 1999, the share of people aged 25 and older completing high school was the lowest in the South (81 percent) and the highest in the Midwest (86 percent). People in the West were the most likely to have completed at least some college (56 percent). However, the Northeast and the West had the greatest share of people with college degrees (28 percent and 27 percent, respectively, not statistically different).

Alaska, Washington, Minnesota, Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado had the highest share of high school graduates. Although Alaska had the highest estimate at 93 percent, this value was not statistically different from that of Washington, Minnesota, and Utah.

The pattern differed for college graduates. With 42 percent of adults aged 25 and older having completed college, Washington, DC, was ahead of the states. However, this share was not statistically different from the 39 percent estimated for Colorado, the state with the highest share of college graduates. Arkansas was at the bottom of the list, with only 17 percent of its adults having graduated from college. However this figure was not statistically different from the shares for Tennessee, West Virginia, Indiana, Mississippi, and Kentucky.

The Census Bureau Can Tell You More

- For more detailed information, consult the following U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Report: *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1999* by Eric C. Newburger and Andrea Curry.
- Look for complete reports and detailed tables on the Census Bureau's World Wide Web site (www.census.gov). Click on "E" and select "Educational Attainment."
- Contact the Education and Social Stratification Branch of the U.S. Census Bureau at 301-457-2464 or e-mail pop@census.gov.
- For information on publications and other resources, see Appendix A.